

The Occupy Wall Street Movement. Analysis of the Protest Movement

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Fuel for Occupy Wall Street's Fire

Sometimes it explodes. But social explosions are rare events. Are the Wall Street protests and their nationwide copycats an explosion or just a flare up?

For an explosion to happen there must be not only explosive material, but plenty of oxygen to feed the fire. For social movements this means that enough working people, students, and unemployed find the necessary unity and inspiration to push through obstacles and maintain enthusiasm. The Wall Street protests have ingredients that can create such unity but the threat of extinguishing it is real.

Although many of the Wall Street protesters are following the tactics of the Arab Revolutions, they've begun on a higher plane politically. The Arab dictatorships made for an easy target and helped unify working people against the regimes; the Wall Street protesters, however, have already identified the money interests behind the bad government in the U.S. — a very similar money interest that rules post-Mubarak Egypt that Egyptians are still mobilizing to dethrone.

But the political head start of Occupy Wall Street doesn't mean they can skip over the need to unify working people in the Egyptian way. The need for concrete political demands becomes all the more important now that the financial elite is the target. And although the Occupy Wall Street movement has put forth some excellent demands, they have not elaborated specific policies that would achieve these demands. Some examples of their demands include: "Ending wealth inequality, ending homelessness, ending poverty, and ending political corruption."

The protesters might think that making the demands broad enough will open the gates to a wider number of people. But these demands create two dangers:

- 1) working people may simply view the demands as unattainable, since all people would like to end poverty but see no way to achieve it.
- 2) vague demands invite political opportunists into the fold, who would like to join the movement in order to kill it.

For example, President of the group Rebuild the Dream, Van Jones, has recently pushed his Democratic Party-friendly organization into the Occupy Wall Street fold. And although Rebuild the Dream puts forth some progressive demands, its ultimate purpose is to mobilize people to re-elect President Obama, a puppet of Wall Street.

If Occupy Wall Street openly identifies both Democrats and Republicans as being in the pockets of Wall Street, opportunists like Jones would find no platform to push their nefarious ulterior motives. In the same way that many rich Egyptians exploited the anti-Mubarak protests for their own ends, the U.S. protests face a similar threat, though better disguised.

More specific demands would also help to accelerate the number of labor unions who join the movement. It must be noted that the union-inspired explosion in Wisconsin and smaller flare-ups around the country helped create the kindling for the sparks on Wall Street. The more unions that join the movement, the more logs go on the fire, and the more ability to reach out via labor's resources to the wider oppressed community. It is no surprise that the labor unions in Egypt — after having helped activate the younger activists via strike waves — are now leading the charge, post-Mubarak, with a new, larger flurry of strike activity. If Occupy Wall Street made a special effort to attract union support, the movement as a whole would benefit greatly.

Some examples of labor-friendly demands that Occupy Wall Street might consider were recently endorsed by the Oregon AFL-CIO state convention, itself based on a resolution passed by the San Francisco Labor Council that calls for mass mobilizations to demand: "Make no cuts or concessions in wages, benefits, and social welfare programs; Tax Wall Street Banks, large and multi-national corporations, and the wealthiest Americans at both the federal and state level; make public investments in education, rebuilding of infrastructure, and public transit improvements."

Although it is good to demand "end unemployment," it's better still to demand "tax the rich to create jobs and save social programs." Not only would such demands attract more labor unions, it would keep union leaders honest; some union leaders have a bad habit of focusing on "foreign trade" and specifically China instead of the corporations and banks inside the U.S. The same labor leaders have an equally bad habit of supporting Wall Street-owned Democrats, making "political independence" an especially necessary position of the movement. Moreover, these demands give a people a sense of what immediate steps could be taken to move from the present to a better future, and they give a sense of where the obstacles lie to a better future: the wealthy elite who want to preserve their privileges.

Finally, union support is crucial because in order for working people to indefinitely occupy something — without fear of losing their jobs — a unified labor movement would need to be organized enough to go on strike and join the street protesters, something that can only happen now on the weekends.

Ultimately, the Occupy Wall Street protests have already succeeded. The movement has successfully re-focused the nation's debate on who ruined the economy and who should be targeted, shifting blame away from immigrants, unions, and other groups of working people, like public employees. The protests have also re-fueled working people's energy after the post-Wisconsin letdown, activating the energies of many who want to collectively organize for progressive change in the interests of working people.

But all movements either grow or shrink. A large Occupy Wall Street march across the Brooklyn Bridge on October 1st resulted in 700 arrests. Through such tactics the police intend to chip away at the movement until they feel strong enough to strangle it. The Occupy Wall Street movement must attract a growing number of allies or face an inevitable smothering.

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